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STATEMENT OF SAMUEL A. ADAMS

My name is Samuel A. Adams. My address is Route 4, Box 240, Leesburg, Virginia 22075. I was employed by the Central Intelligence Agency for about ten years until June 1, 1973 when I resigned.

For seven of the ten years, I was the Agency's principal analyst on the Viet Cong. For two of them -- from September 1965 until November 1967, the eve of the Communist's Tet offensive --

- (1) I was the only analyst at CIA headquarters studying the VC full-time. The Agency's present director, Mr. William E. Colby, has since stated that "The Agency's assessments in the late 1960's
- (2) were based in substantial measure on Mr. Adams' work."

Since my resignation, I have written a number of articles highly critical of the CIA. The most recent appeared in the May 1975 edition of "Harpers" magazine. Commenting on the article, Mr. Colby declared on June 4, 1975 that the charges it contained "go to the very heart of the intelligence profession." \*

My testimony today deals with the Viet Cong Tet offensive, which caught the American intelligence community largely by surprise. In the last few days, I understand, you have heard of other instances in which the United States government was taken aback by events in foreign lands. These surprises, however, differ from our astonishment at Tet in one key respect. Whereas they arose from such factors as negligence, or a misreading of evidence, the Tet surprise stemmed in large measure from corruption in the

- (3) \*This article was cleared by the CIA.

- 2 -

intelligence process. In the months before the offensive, U. S. intelligence had deliberately downgraded the strength of the enemy army in order to portray the Viet Cong as weaker than they actually were. [Although our aim was to fool the American press, the public and the Congress, we in intelligence succeeded best in fooling ourselves.]

What was the nature of the surprise at Tet? President Johnson -- whose resignation the offensive caused -- put his finger on it in his book, "The Vantage Point." "We knew a show of strength was coming," he wrote (on page 384): "it was more massive than we anticipated." It is my belief, and I think the evidence shows, that American intelligence had so denigrated the Viet Cong's capabilities that we simply could not have predicted the size of the Tet attack. You will remember that the offensive hit not only Saigon and the American Embassy, but forty out of forty-four province capitals, and over a hundred district seats.

The story begins in the second half of 1966. During that period, I discovered at CIA headquarters a series of documents which suggested that the strength of the communist forces in Vietnam -- then officially carried at just under 300,000 -- was more likely double, or close to 600,000. In the following months, American intelligence (including Westmoreland's Order of Battle Section, whose job it was to keep track of the various categories of the Viet Cong forces) looked the documents over and concluded that my findings about numbers had a good deal of validity.

By mid-1967, the documentary evidence for higher numbers was so massive that there was no longer any question that the

- 3 -

ambiguity of estimate  
enemy army was much bigger than we thought. The CIA's position at this point was that we should increase the enemy strength estimate to reflect the evidence.

Fearing the public reaction to higher numbers, however, Westmoreland's command was lobbying to keep the estimate at its official levels -- that is, below 300,000. And in July 1967, the command began to argue that certain categories of Viet Cong (who had been in the estimate since 1962) should be dropped. Furthermore, they began to sharply "scale down" -- this was their own wording -- the number of VC soldiers in certain types of units in the official Order of Battle.

I would like now to begin quoting telegrams and memoranda which illustrate my assertions.

The first is "Secret, Eyes Only" cable sent from General Abrams in Saigon to General Wheeler (head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) on August 20, 1967. It indicated the newly-found higher numbers were "in sharp contrast to the current overall strength figure of about 299,000 given to the press here." He thereupon suggested dropping two categories of VC from the strength estimate in order to keep it at its old level. The main reason for this, he indicated, was "press reaction." He went on. "We have been projecting an image of success over the recent months..." he stated, and (if we allow the higher numbers to become public), "all available caveats and explanations will not prevent the press from drawing an erroneous and gloomy conclusion...All those who have an incorrect view of the war will be reinforced and the task

- 4 -

will be more difficult." General Westmoreland later signed off on the cable and it was sent to the CIA's then-Director Richard Helms. It received wide distribution within the Agency.

Twenty days later, an intelligence conference convened in Saigon to hash out the enemy numbers. The conference, which included representatives from Westmoreland's command, from CIA, DIA, and State Department Intelligence, concluded with the CIA caving in and signing an "agreement" which kept the enemy force estimate at its old size. (I described the conference, which I attended, in my "Harpers" piece.) The "Agreement" dropped the two categories from the estimate which General Abrams had suggested on August 20, and accepted the military's "scaled down" numbers. After the conference was over, Westmoreland's public relations staff drafted a briefing for the press on the new Order of Battle. The draft was sent to Washington for review.

The draft briefing was so blatantly misleading that it made some CIA officials question the wisdom of having caved in to the military's numbers at Saigon. I quote now from comments on the draft by a CIA official, Mr. Paul V. Walsh, of the Deputy Directorate of Intelligence. "As seen from this office", wrote Mr. Walsh on October 11, 1967, "I must rank (the briefing) as one of the greatest snow jobs since Potemkin constructed his village." It was so bad, he concluded, that it "gives us all the justification we need to go straight again."

A few days later, however, it was evident that Mr. Walsh had changed his mind about going straight. On October 23, 1967 he

- 5 -

wrote "We feel that the Order of Battle figures generally understate the strength of enemy forces but recognize the apparent obligation for the estimate to be consistent with the figures agreed to at Saigon." Shortly thereafter, I was retired as the CIA's chief estimator of VC numbers and the job was put under the supervision of Mr. Walsh.

Five days after the second Walsh memo, Ambassador Bunker forwarded his views on the matter from Saigon in a "Secret" cable to the White House ("Eyes Only Rostow," dated October 28, 1967). He stated "I understand that the Department of Defense has approved a draft press briefing on the new VC/NVA order of battle picture and sent it to the White House for final approval. One aspect of it still bothers General Westmoreland... and myself. Given the overriding need to demonstrate progress in grinding down the enemy, it is essential that we do not drag too many red herrings across the trail." He went on to say that to admit to the press that they had dropped certain categories "from the Order of Battle seems to me simply to invite trouble. We may end up with stories that enemy strength is greater rather than less. Far better in our view is to deal with the matter orally if it arises...(in the hopes of) forestalling many confusing and undesirable questions." He concludes by saying "Sorry to badger you about this, but the credibility gap is such that we don't want to end up conveying the opposite of what we intend."

Two weeks later the press briefings began. On November 11, 1967, Westmoreland's command in Saigon told the press that Viet

- 6 -

Cong/NVA strength had actually declined (to 242,000) and that the decline was due to heavy casualties and plummeting morale. No mention was made of the categories dropped from the estimate.

(See the New York Times account which appeared the next day.)

At a press conference Westmoreland held on November 22, the same figures were put forward. The New York Daily News headlined it as "THE ENEMY IS RUNNING OUT OF MEN." And then at a third one on November 24 -- it was finally admitted that the two categories had disappeared. But by this time, the press was so thoroughly confused with conflicting stories that the disappearance went unnoticed. On the same day, Mr. George Allen, Deputy Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs to the Director, Mr. Helms, wrote that Westmoreland's numbers were "contrived" and "phoney" and that his estimates were "controlled by a desire to stay under 300,000."

Three days later, on November 27, 1967, the CIA station sent from Saigon a most remarkable memorandum. In effect, it predicted the Tet offensive. Written by a team of analysts named Joseph Hovey, Bobby Layton, and James Ogle, it stated that the Viet Cong were planning "a political and military offensive utilizing all VC assets" and that the offensive was to include military attacks on "all major cities" in South Vietnam. On December 14, 1967, I was asked to comment on the memorandum. The only flaw I could find in it was that it used the official Order of Battle figures which had been agreed to at Saigon. My comments included the following:

The Viet Cong main battle forces are "considerably larger than we give them credit for. The Order of Battle omits a myriad

- 7 -

of small, but elite units; it frequently underestimates the size of units it does carry; it does not take into account many North Vietnamese soldiers who are already in the South." The comments went on to say that the number of service troops agreed to at Saigon was "fraudulently" low, and the official number of "guerillas" was shy by at least 40,000. Furthermore, it stated, the official estimates omitted "100,000 Self-Defense militiamen" (one of the categories dropped from the estimate at Saigon), "tens of thousands" of Assault Youths, "scores of thousands" of such VC cadres as the Armed Public Security Police, "and goodness knows what else." The next day, on December 16, 1967, the memo which predicted Tet was forwarded to the White House. But it failed to mention that something might be awry with the official strength estimates. Likewise a few days earlier (on December 8, 1967) the CIA had sent to Secretary of Defense McNamara a memorandum which also used the official numbers agreed to in Saigon. That part of the memo which concerned Viet Cong strength had been superintended by Mr. Walsh, the new overseer of VC numbers.

Congress was also fed the phoney figures. The Director's New Year briefing to Congress, for example, not only used the Saigon numbers but even stated that the enemy's strength was declining. It did not mention that any categories had been dropped from the Order of Battle. At the time I was working in the Director's office, and was issuing almost daily warnings about unaccounted-for units, including incidentally, large numbers of artillery formations.

- 8 -

The Tet offensive hit in the early hours of January 30, 1968. On that day, I drafted two papers -- one a memorandum, the other a cable. The memorandum, which constituted my resignation from the office of the Director, stated that the official VC strength estimate was "a monument of deceit." The cable, intended for Saigon, noted that many units which had participated in the attacks that morning had never been included in the Order of Battle. The draft cable concluded that it was "something of an anomaly to be taking so much punishment from Communist soldiers whose existence is not officially acknowledged." The draft cable, never sent, was later returned to me by Mr. Drexel Godfrey, Chief of Office of Current Intelligence of the DDI, with the following notation: "To Sam Adams. Suggest you hold this until things quiet down..."

Gentlemen, I imagine all of you will remember the shock of the Communist Tet offensive. I can assure you that your wonderment at the size of the attack was shared by virtually everyone in the Executive Branch of the government, including most people who worked in intelligence. There were exceptions. One of them was myself. Another was Mr. George Allen. But unfortunately neither of us mattered, since we were in no position to do anything with our peculiar knowledge.

Rather than belabor the point, I would like to close my prepared testimony with two observations, one in the form of a question, the other in the form of a practical example.



- 9 -

The question is this. What if, on December 15, 1967, when the Saigon memo which predicted the Tet offensive went to the White House, it had been accompanied by an estimate that the VC Army was almost twice as big as we thought -- would the White House have put two and two together? I don't know. It never happened.

The practical example is this. In the days following Tet, some 1200 American aircraft in Vietnam were destroyed or damaged, mostly by shrapnel from artillery shells. This was totally unexpected, probably because so few Viet Cong artillery units were carried in the Order of Battle -- even though evidence was abundant that there were many. But this evidence was never assiduously sought out, apparently for the reason that any influx of new units would have caused the VC strength estimates to lurch sharply upwards -- something the intelligence estimators sought to avoid. The end result was that the planners -- who worry about such matters as how to protect airplanes -- had failed even to build revetments, which are really only mounds of earth. And thus it happened that on the early morning of January 30, 1968 most American airplanes in Vietnam were parked wing-tip to wing-tip -- like the P-40's at Hickam Field at Pearl Harbor.

Thank you, Gentlemen, for allowing me to present this testimony.